

Michelle Harven: This is Force For Hire.

Desmon Farris: A deep dive into private military contracting, and how it's transforming the battlefield.

Michelle Harven: I'm Michelle Harven.

Desmon Farris: I'm Desmon Farris, and we're your hosts. Welcome to our first glimpse into the lives of real people in this industry.

Michelle Harven: Our first episode gave a lot of information. We talked to some experts, researchers, and academics.

Desmon Farris: Now, we'll pass the mic to a person whose life has been impacted by private military contracting, and hear what they have to say, and let them tell you their experiences. Our guest today was a former US Army infantryman turned private military contractor. But let's start from the beginning. Here's Adam Gonzales.

Adam Gonzales: I remember being a kid going to baseball games or football games, whatever the case may be, and I'm hearing the national anthem play, and just kind of processing the words and thinking about the words of the national anthem, and seeing the flag wave off in the distance. At a young age, it really kind of instilled a lot of patriotism in me. And I thought, "Well, this is probably my future calling," if you will. So I ended up joining the Army. I spent a short time there with a [inaudible 00:01:18] attachment. Our mission was reconnaissance and surveillance type of unit, more focused on the surveillance aspect.

Adam Gonzales: That was a cool experience, but I thought that there was probably something more beyond that. I wasn't sure if the military was quite my path. And there was a guy from our unit that ended up getting out and joining a company called Blackwater in about October 2003 timeframe. He said to me, he's like, "Hey, you got the same resume as I do. I think you'll be able to get in with these guys. Why don't you drop your resume, see what happens?"

Adam Gonzales: So here we are December 2003 timeframe, invasion of Iraq happened I believe in March of 2003, so here we are about seven, eight months later. The US Secret Service came in and was supposed to protect the ambassador, and they did an assessment on the city of Baghdad where the ambassador was going to be, and they're like this is kind of out of our realm of knowledge and expertise to provide a sustained protection solution for the ambassador. So it ended up getting outsourced to a private military corporation, and that corporation that won the contract was Blackwater.

Adam Gonzales: It all started with a phone call from one of their recruiting managers who said, "Are you interested in protecting this US ambassador? You'll end up going to a two week train up/assessment of your skills to make sure you could essentially shoot, move, and communicate. And you'll be making \$500 a day." And I

thought to myself, "Wow, okay, that sounds good." And \$500 a day, I'm trying to do the math in my head, but I've never had to calculate that number before because that's a wage that was kind of unheard of at that time. So I kind of paused for a minute, he's like, "Yep, it's \$15,000 a month." And I said, "\$15,000 a month, I'm in. Let's do it." He said, "Okay, well, I'm going to process you here. We'll book some plane tickets and you'll be coming out to our training site out in Moyock, North Carolina."

Adam Gonzales: And so flew out there, it was a very new experience. I think what was new about it was I didn't really know that this world existed when I was in the military. I didn't know that the government outsourced these types of operations, these types of contracts. I figured everything was handled by the military. I guess a little bit naïve, just ignorance, but was a completely new world that I didn't know existed.

Adam Gonzales: And so you're the corporate warrior is what it was kind of known as back then, quiet professional, the silent professional, the private military contractor. Some people use the term mercenary, however, mercenary isn't an accurate description, and that's mainly because we were supporting the US government. We were supporting US democracy, and we weren't pledging our allegiance to a foreign nation or being paid by a foreign nation.

Adam Gonzales: Arriving at the airport, our instructions were to meet down at the baggage claim and the Blackwater guys will be down there and you'll know who they were. Looking around you could kind of tell who the people were probably a part of the organization and who weren't just by the way they were kind of built, their demeanor. They were all big dudes, in shape, bearded, in suits. Said, "Okay, grab your bags. There's two black Suburbans outside. Throw them in the Suburbans, and we'll move out to the hotel. Nothing like basic training at all. A lot more professional, big boy rules. Not like, "No, you have to be here and if you're not you're AWOL." No, they don't care. They're like, "If you're not there, that's it." You don't get to make \$500 a day.

Adam Gonzales: It was a compound out in the middle of nowhere, small farm town that had no idea that there was this huge training facility out in the countryside that had shooting ranges just for Little Bird helicopters that eventually evolved into all sorts of other stuff after that.

Adam Gonzales: On day one is the initial in doc where everything is a pass/fail. So if you fail, you go home, and that's it. I was a young kid at the time, 24 years old, but there was a lot of guys who were retired out DEVGRU. I would say 80% of the class were all SEALS because it was a company owned by SEALS, Eric Prince. Ended up going through the shooting quals, I passed, PT test really well. And then moved on to the kind of training phase over the course of the next two weeks. And this was a training phase kind of designed to teach PSD and motorcade operations. At that time, it was kind of a newer concept and the only people that really knew about these kind of operations were your private military organizations.

Adam Gonzales: Everybody was pretty professional. Everybody was an alpha male. If you were a good shooter, they kind of welcomed you in a little more. If you were a dirt bag in any way, well, they didn't welcome you, and not only that, you wouldn't move onto the next phase. So it was kind of weird because you would see a guy one day and then the next day he would be gone.

Adam Gonzales: At the completion of the two week course, you pretty much deployed immediately thereafter. I think the hardest part of all that was not knowing if today or tomorrow or when was going to be your last day. Actually making it through to the end and being selected because even though you make it through, you might not get selected to deploy. And at that time, contracts were few and far between and there weren't really very many contractors out there. So at the time, the most stressful part for me was, "Okay, well, I just took out a loan of money that I don't have to pay for gear that I didn't have because I'm going to make \$500 a day. But in order to make that \$500 a day, I've got to complete this training."

Adam Gonzales: I had a lot of things working against me, but I thought, "Well, you know what? There's a lot of guys here who have a lot of experience. If I go in there, concentrate on the hard skills that I have, excel there, and if I keep my mouth shut and be a sponge and just absorb as much as I can, then I might have a chance to make it through."

Adam Gonzales: We ended up deploying out of Norfolk International Airport. And at the time, we were on a chartered aircraft with probably about 20 or so American expats, all Blackwater contractors, and then about 50 Chilean contractors that Blackwater had also outsourced and deployed to man a lot of the static security sites.

Adam Gonzales: I arrived in Kuwait City on a chartered aircraft, and Kuwait at that time, hot during the day, 100, 120, somewhere in there, and it was hot. We all loaded up onto the C-130, took off like normal. But then when we got into Baghdad, we ended up doing a combat landing. I thought, "I'm going to die before I even get in the country." This is a nosedive combat landing, which I've only experienced with Blackwater pilots in a Blackwater aircraft, which was the CASA 212. Well, essentially they fly over the airfield, they point that nose straight down, and they drop, and they drop, and they drop. And at the very last minute, they pull up and boom, there you are on the runway. And I was like, "Holy shit."

Adam Gonzales: So at that point, we had to travel down what was the most dangerous stretch of road in the entire world. It was called Route Irish, and there was a stretch of it that around 14 or 15 people were killed every single day. So the chances of getting smoked were pretty high, especially if you were in a soft skin vehicle that has no armor on it, no bulletproof windows. If you take rounds, they're going to go right through like a hot knife through butter all day long.

Adam Gonzales: So ended up getting to where I was going to be living at, which shortly after the invasion, the military rolled in, kicked Saddam Hussein's mother out of her

house, and they put the ambassador in that house. So the ambassador was in this three story, all marble, beautiful palace, and that's where I lived. And then Ambassador Bremer, he worked in what we called the CPA, the Central Provisional Authority, which was, at that time, the US embassy.

Adam Gonzales: So contracts back then, you signed a three month contract, and then if you wanted to extend, you could extend, and if you wanted to go home for a month or two, you could go home, you could come back. It was really flexible, really convenient. It wasn't like a military deployment at all. All of us that came in were replacements for guys who went home on leave, who rotated home. But the thing is, most guys wanted to stay there because you're only making money when you have boots on ground. If you're at home on leave, you're not making that 15 grand a month.

Adam Gonzales: So first day on the job, I was on the static security side of the house. My responsibility was the security of the compound where we had Ambassador Paul Bremer, which was not a very big place. But the palace was a giant palace, so we controlled all access in and out of the compound, vehicle access, pedestrian access. It was still open to attack, which is why they paid us \$15,000 a month.

Adam Gonzales: So there was one night, the sun had just gone down and the detail lead kicks the door open and he yells, "Get it on. We're under attack." And I said, "Oh, shit. This just got real." So I threw up my poncho liner and by the time the poncho liner floated down to the bed, I was completely clothed, completely kitted up, had my M-4, and I was out the door. It was nothing but gunfire, 360 degrees, completely surrounded us. You could see the tracers. And so at that point, the first things that happened is your palms get sweaty. Your mouth kind of goes dry. So I went upstairs, grabbed the ambassador, knocked on his door. I said, "Sir, we're under attack. Need to move you to hard room." He grabbed his book, and he didn't really acknowledge me at all. So we put him in the hard room. I said, "Sir, I need you to put your armor on." And the whole time, he's reading his book because he knows his Blackwater guys are outside securing his compound, so he's got nothing to worry about. He trusted us 100%.

Adam Gonzales: So I put his armor on, I said, "Okay, stay here. We're going to go square this away outside." So I stepped outside, I started hearing tink, tink, tink, tink, tink. And I looked down, and it's bullets. All the tracers that were shooting up in the air, well, they have to come down somewhere. And they were all coming down around me. But if one of those bullets would have caught me with no helmet on, that's it, I'd be done. What a horrible way to go. We got intel that the Iraqi soccer team won and all that gunfire was celebratory gunfire. It gave the impression that we were under fire.

Adam Gonzales: We had a US ambassador who was in charge of the re-institution of a new government and the reconstruction of Iraq. So what that meant was there were a lot of pissed off Muslims and a lot of pissed off terrorists. For the first time in world history, a Christian American in charge of a Muslim nation. And so there

was a \$15 million bounty on the ambassador's head. And in March, al-Zarqawi put an extra 22 pounds of gold on this ambassador's head and called for every terrorist in the world to converge on Baghdad and kill this ambassador. And a small handful of us protected him, had a \$50,000 bounty on our heads.

Adam Gonzales: So I ended up working for Blackwater for another three-and-a-half years after that, so until about 2008 timeframe. And then in 2009, I ended up going to work for a company called The Four Horsemen. It was based out of Kabul. It was an American company, owned by a former Green Beret. And the mission was quite different than all the other missions in the past. Instead of doing PSD or static security, our job was to transport US mail. So we were essentially the Pony Express of Afghanistan. And we had a 100 man Afghan militia force to assist us in transporting this US mail safely and securely.

Adam Gonzales: There's a few factors that affect the morale of troops over seas. So if mama's cookies, grandma's cookies, if your girlfriend's card isn't getting to you with her perfume sprayed in on the inside, that's going to drop morale. And when you're at a combat outpost out in the middle of Afghanistan in the middle of nowhere, it takes two weeks to get the mail. If the Taliban could affect that, and now it takes you a month to get all that good stuff, yeah, your morale is going to drop. And that Taliban knew it.

Adam Gonzales: So this was a super dangerous contract where you were guaranteed action. So I'm like, "Ah, guaranteed action. That sounds right up my alley. What's the pay?" And they're like, "\$6,000 a month." Wow, I was making \$650 a day with Blackwater just a couple years prior. And I said, "Well, you know what? I think this is a worthy cause, transporting US mail. I think this matters. It's a cause worth jumping on even if it was \$6,000 a month." And it's actually good money if you're in the States. That breaks down to \$200 a day, which on an eight hour day, it's \$25 an hour. Well, \$25 an hour, you could get a construction job, and you're not going to be risking your life on a daily basis. On this specific contract, we got ambushed every single day by as many as 200 Taliban in one ambush. So not good odds.

Adam Gonzales: It takes a certain kind of individual to accept a contract like this. And I think it's kind of partially because I believe in the cause. I believe in the fight. I believe in supporting the troops. So this mission directly supports the troops. That meant the world. So I would link up with my militia outside of Kabul. 100 guys with RPGs, on machine guns, you name it, they had it. My objective is to go pick up conexes from Bagram Airfield. I transport it to Kabul. And we would drive these to all the combat outposts. So everybody knew what was in that conex, it was US mail. And the Taliban knew that they needed to hit that.

Adam Gonzales: And you didn't have a whole lot of time to train your militia. And the Taliban at that point were pretty well trained, pretty well seasoned already. So it didn't take long for them to maneuver on you. And once they maneuvered on you, you were pretty much screwed unless you had other assets. So we took a lot of wounded. We had a lot of KIAs on our side, a lot of Afghans. We get ambushed

every day, all day long, until we got to the outpost to deliver the mail. And then we had to drive back. And it seemed like we'd get wounded every single day.

Adam Gonzales: So then we're transporting US mail out to one of these combat outposts, we're driving along, and the lead vehicle gets hit by an IED. And it was a small IED, but enough to blow out the windows, enough to cause shrapnel damage to the drivers inside. And at that point was when the Taliban used that to initiate the ambush. And the RPG hit the lead vehicle. At that point, we just moved into this little mud hut and started engaging bad guys. And at that point, it was total chaos. I had tunnel vision. My mouth was dry. My hands were sweaty. Everything that they say happens happened. But at that point, I've already been through so many ambushes and of course, training all that kicks in, it all kind of takes over.

Adam Gonzales: And that point of when it became real was when one of my friends got hit. We were inside of a mud hut. This was a [inaudible 00:19:22]. It had a sand floor. I remember the sun, it just kind of baking on me from outside because it had no roof on it. But I remember the walls being extremely tall, maybe eight feet tall. So you couldn't really climb up on anything to engage from up there. It was the worst place you could be in and be ambushed.

Adam Gonzales: As American military forces, we're trained to not stay in one spot for too long. We're trained to shoot and move to a new position and so that way the bad guys can't track in on you and engage you and kill you. My friend was a South African, and he stayed in the same spot, and he ended up catching a round to the face because of it, right through the chin, blowing off his jaw, and went through his neck. It was almost total loss of life for him. He laid back. He was just sitting up against the back wall, which was just a few feet away.

Adam Gonzales: Now because he was shot through the neck, every time my buddy's heart would beat, imagine a water fountain of blood was kind of shot in an arc across, almost hitting me. And I was about ten feet away from him. And I thought, "This is absolutely insane that that blood was shot out of him and can reach me ten feet away." And so each time his heart would beat, a new arc of blood would shoot out. But it would become shorter, and shorter, and shorter, and shorter. I didn't have much time left before the blood stopped squirting.

Adam Gonzales: We're trained to win the fight first. After the fight is won, you can take care of the wounded. Four or five arcs later, there was a lull in the ambush. I ran over to him. I swept the teeth out of his mouth. And so on the bleeding, I ended up dumping some TraumaDex onto his neck, which you're never supposed to do on a neck wound ever. But it was either that or he was going to die. So I did that and then I wrapped him with a gauze bandage. And he wanted to get back in the fight. He couldn't speak, but he wanted to grab his rifle and continue on. And I said, "No, man, you're good. We got things under control."

Adam Gonzales: And then it was at that time that a DShK opened up. Holy shit, a DShK is basically the Russian version of our 50 caliber machine gun. That's it. We're

screwed. And I said, "That's going to rip through this [inaudible 00:21:49]," because it was super close. Half a mile would be super close. So I look out the window, and I realize it was one Humvee with three guys from the AMP, Afghan Military Police. And I thought, "Holy shit, I think we got saved here." I was totally shocked, but realized at that moment, this our time to get our wounded and get out of the kill zone. And that's exactly what we did. And we ended up moving on down to an outpost not too far away. And we put our South African on a Bird and got him to Bagram. So 99% of the time, Afghan Military Police were absolutely worthless. And this 1% of the time just miraculously, totally saved our butts.

Adam Gonzales: I think there is a big misconception out there, people will think, "Oh, these contractors are out there and they're always running and gunning, and they're getting into battles every day, all the time." That's actually not the case at all. Contractors are there to augment the military in strictly defensive operations. But there's been years where I've been over there in Iraq, we don't get engaged. We don't engage any bad guys from any kind of engagement, like nothing happens. It's totally quiet. And we call those the good days.

Adam Gonzales: And then the day I was supposed to leave, I woke up that morning, had everything packed, and a helicopter was coming in for me like early in the morning. But the Taliban attacked us on the day I was supposed to go home. So again, another huge battle ensued. Everybody's running to the wall. I grab my weapon, I'm running. As I'm running, you could hear the machine gun fire just cranking. We ended up kind of winning the fight there with a couple decisive mortar rounds that landed in some key spots. And then that night, I got on a Bird, and I went home, and in three days later, I'm in America again on the southern shores of Lake Michigan in July. That's kind of a strange feeling in itself right there.

Adam Gonzales: After that battle, my hooch, where I was living, it took a rocket, and it burned to the ground, and I said, "You know what, this should be a sign, I should never come back ever again." And I made a promise to myself I would never return to the wars. I was in search of starting a normal, personal life here in America. And that right there was the hardest thing to do because I had absolutely no network here in America because I spent my entire adult life overseas. I am kind of failing miserably at trying to find a job here in America.

Adam Gonzales: So maybe six months later, and I went to work for an electrical company out of Chicago. I was like an assistant project manager. And it was probably like the lowest point in my life. I remember times where I would drive my truck to work, I don't know, 45 minute drive, I'd sit there in the job site parking lot, and I'd look at the job site that I was going to. I would think about the places that I've been, look back at the job site, and I would cry to myself in the morning in my truck, thinking, "I don't want to go in there. I don't belong here. I don't even know what I'm doing here. I don't even want to be here." And so that was an extremely low point for me, but I said, "You know what? This is the promise I

made to myself. I'm going to give it a year here at this job just to see what develops. Who knows what can develop?"

Adam Gonzales: So a friend of mine in the Houston, Texas area, he was in the private security industry. He said, "Hey, man, you go the right skills. Why don't you come down here? I'll get you a job down here. Relocate, and I'll be able to get you work." That was kind of the tipping point of where life started to turn around and go in a positive direction.

Adam Gonzales: After a couple of years in Houston, I got hooked up with a company that was doing hostage rescues. And I got hooked up with them because I actually did a hostage rescue for them in Central America. I completed the mission. I did it so well, they said, "How do we keep you full time?" And I said, "I would like a normal person job in America." And then I ended up becoming their director of operations. So instead of me actually going on assignments all over the world, I put together teams of guys like myself, and I deployed them all over the world.

Adam Gonzales: And then right around that time, I met my wife, or who is now my wife, a former Army captain. And we started a business venture designed to helping transition veterans. I wanted to help men and women not go through the same pitfalls that I went through while trying to transition. And we called it Silent Professionals.

Desmon Farris: Man, sitting down with Adam, I could see on his face the different reactions while he was telling the stories, and it was genuine. So it was a really good forum for us talking back and forth.

Michelle Harven: Yeah, it's really cool after reading about Blackwater for so long to actually hear a story from a person and sort of put that human face onto something that we hear about so much.

Desmon Farris: Yeah, and Adam's journey isn't done yet. We'll pick up with his and his wife's company, Silent Professionals, in our reenlistment episode. This is where we'll focus on that transition from soldier to contractor.

Michelle Harven: And we'll talk about what it takes to make the cut and take a look inside the job market today.

Desmon Farris: And thanks to Adam for sharing his story. And thanks to Stars and Stripes for giving us this opportunity to bring people like Adam to you.

Michelle Harven: If you enjoy hearing firsthand accounts of contracting life, we'll be back every other episode with more personal experiences. And you won't want to miss our next episode. It delves into a topic we couldn't avoid talking about, Blackwater. It's the name everyone thinks about when talking about private security contracting.

Desmon Farris: So don't forget to subscribe and let us know your thoughts or if you have any experiences or suggestions you would like to share. Our email is podcast@stripes.com.

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